



# A Conversation with Suchitra Mattai

by Jan Garden Castro

# New





qa

SUCHITHRA SATTAI  
BODIES & SOULS

Installation view  
of "Bodies  
and Souls," Tampa  
Museum of  
Art, with (left to right)  
*bodies and souls*,  
2021, and *to leave  
a trace*, 2024.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

# Mythologies:



**Suchitra Mattai's** multidisciplinary work explores how memory, myth, and oral traditions can be harnessed to unravel received narratives rooted in patriarchal and colonialist systems. By re-imagining the past, she opens up the future. Drawing on Indian miniature painting, European tapestry, and craft-based practices like embroidery and weaving, the Indo-Caribbean artist postulates a “future space” of alternative mythologies that celebrate and monumentalize the experiences and labor of brown women. Within this space, standard binaries—between old and new, East and West, history and mythology, labor and leisure—can be placed in conversation, questioned and reconfigured. As materially and visually rich as they are conceptually complex, Mattai's wrapped, braided, stitched, and woven works, many made from transformed vintage saris and incorporating found objects, serve as allegories for universal and personal narratives that empower forgotten stories while imagining new possibilities.



**Jan Garden Castro:** This year, you had three concurrent solo exhibitions over the summer and early fall. “We are nomads, we are dreamers” at Socrates Sculpture Park featured a number of outdoor works, including six color-rich, sloping forms, described as “pods,” that evoked continents. Their mirrored tops, reflecting the sky and its cloud formations, gave a sense of movement to these rooted monoliths. What was the symbolism behind the shapes, materials, and colors?

**Suchitra Mattai:** I wanted these forms to feel like they were either being excavated from the ground or descending from the sky—dropped like artifacts from the future. I was also thinking of them as tectonic shapes. I partially grew up in Nova Scotia, where I was struck by the huge glacial deposits scattered across the land, in places like Peggy's Cove. These objects, in a way, are migratory.

In terms of color, I wanted the palette to be a controlled element in the installation. I consider the six forms of *becoming* as a single work operating in unison. Within each form, one color blends into another. On either side, adjacent pods picked up one of those colors to blend it with yet another, as if each one were cross-pollinating with the next.

**JGC:** Global migrations have become headline news, but your take on the issue is very personal. Could you talk a bit about your family history?

**SM:** My family is originally from Uttar Pradesh, in northeastern India. Because of British colonial rule, my ancestors—starting with my great-grandparents, all of my family on all sides—were taken from India to Guyana as indentured laborers to work on sugar plantations. India was the biggest colony of the British, so that's where they looked for a new labor force when slavery ended in the Caribbean around the 1830s. There is a lot of quiet around that history.

**JGC:** Was making outdoor work a new process for you? Your materials are more typically suited to indoor works.

**SM:** The Socrates project was my first large-scale public installation, so I was super excited about it. I did an outdoor installation in 2019 for the Sharjah



“**Monuments have historically memorialized political power and domination** rather than transformation and adaptation. I wanted to subvert those expectations.”



OPPOSITE:  
Installation view  
of “Bodies  
and Souls,” Tampa  
Museum of  
Art, with *to leave  
a trace*, 2024.

THIS PAGE:  
*a cosmic awakening*,  
2023.  
Vintage saris, fabric,  
tinsel, beaded  
fringe, and tassels,  
150 x 288 in.





THIS PAGE:

***phala (fruit),***  
**2023.**

Vintage saris, fringe,  
and rope, dimensions  
variable.

OPPOSITE,  
FROM TOP:

***becoming,***  
**2024.**

Vintage saris, net, and  
mirror-polished stainless  
steel, six sculptures,  
view of installation at  
Socrates Sculpture Park.

***a story yet untold,***  
**2024.**

Worn saris, fabric,  
cord, and vintage shelf,  
80 x 70 in.

THIS PAGE: ROBERT WEDEMAYER, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ROBERTS PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES /  
OPPOSITE, TOP: SCOTT LYNCH, COURTESY SOCRATES SCULPTURE PARK / OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: HEATHER RASMUSSEN



Biennial, but it was a completely different environment with different materials.

The Socrates show was about migration. The saris came from my family and from all over India. It was about weaving worn, recycled clothing together to unite women of the diaspora. I call the works monuments to *becoming* because I wanted to celebrate and memorialize the process of transformation that all immigrants have to experience. Monuments have historically memorialized political power and domination rather than transformation and adaptation. I wanted to subvert those expectations.

Of course, working with textiles outdoors posed challenges, since they change when exposed to the elements. I'm not attached to objects and the permanence of things. I use a lot of my family heirlooms in my work. So, this was an extension of that practice. When Kaitlin Garcia-Maestas, Curator and Director of Exhibitions at Socrates, and I were first chatting, the proximity of the East River flowing to the Atlantic Ocean became a huge part of it. I have lived all over the Atlantic. Guyana is on the Atlantic, as are Nova Scotia and New Jersey, and that was an important connection with migration. And Queens, where Socrates is located, is home to many immigrants.

**JGC:** The sense of movement was underscored by your collaboration with Barkha Dance Company, which performed three programs.

**SM:** I met Barkha Patel in Los Angeles, where I live, and I saw her perform two distinct types of dance—classical Kathak and an innovative contemporary cross between modern dance and Kathak. I was intrigued by her experimentation and asked her to choreograph based on these forms.

**JGC:** Since you live in Los Angeles, this was a long-range and long-distance project. What was the best part? What was the most challenging?

**SM:** I'll start with the challenging part—being able to communicate with fabricators to make sure that every aspect of the project was being thought through. We worked with Fourth State Fabricators in Poughkeepsie to make the steel armatures for the sculptures and the mirror-polished stainless







THIS PAGE:  
***the guide,***  
**2024.**

Worn saris, found  
object, fringe, and  
vintage gateway,  
76 x 34 x 18 in.

OPPOSITE:  
***to touch the sky,***  
**2024.**

Worn saris, found  
furniture, rope,  
and beaded trim,  
110 x 43 x 41 in.



steel tops. I designed the shapes and decided what was possible with the materials.

The tapestries themselves were made in my Los Angeles studio. Of course, tapestries and textiles have a mind of their own, so it was crucial for them to accurately adhere to the frame. The backing is a gridded net, my own invention. The process is almost like embroidery, where you weave strips of worn saris back and forth and knot them. There's a challenge there, too, in creating organic forms with such a geometric structure.

The best part is that Socrates is a community gathering space, so the sculptures reflected what was going on in the environment—migrating clouds, landing birds, swaying trees, people taking selfies. I was thinking about the relationships among the park, the environment, the sculpture, and the people. I wanted the project to be participatory.

Being an artist, one has to let go of any expectations, and that is a beautiful thing to me. I had no reference for what these works would look like or feel like until we completed them. To see the ways that they mirrored their surroundings was rewarding. The labor that went into them was a great joy.

**JGC: Where did your embroidery/weaving technique originate?**

**SM:** I learned more traditional practices from my grandmothers. One was a seamstress, and one sewed all her own clothes. I learned to sew, crochet, and embroider from them when I was very young. This process is an extension of that and an invention of my own.

**JGC: Any collaborators you want to acknowledge?**

**SM:** The entire staff at Socrates and my whole team—especially my studio manager, Fia Tharp. They're all wonderful.

**JGC: "she walked in reverse and found their songs," which was on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco, was your largest solo exhibition to date. Could you talk about the inspirations behind the major forms and installations in the show?**

**SM:** To me, the idea of "walking in reverse" means that





you're still in the present, but you move back in time to unearth the stories of your ancestors in order to position yourself in the world. The whole show was about memory. *Pappy's house* (2024), the house that my grandparents lived in, in Guyana, became the central work. *Pappy's house* is impenetrable, just as, sometimes, memory eludes us. I was thinking about the medieval mnemonic process of using architecture as a way of storing information and being able to remember it.

*memory palace* (2024), another installation, hangs from the ceiling and shows an interior space of fantasy. Found furniture, soft sculpture, and videos of the Atlantic Ocean combine to create a fantastical space where new mythologies can be formulated, where stories can be unearthed and shared. What I mean by a new mythology is that if a mythology holds all that we fear and all that we love, then to have a more equitable future space for all of us, we need to find new heroes and heroines and new myths.

**JGC: The title work, *she walked in reverse and found their songs*, expresses that theme on top of a found tapestry, which originally depicted a scene from Greco-Roman mythology.**

**SM:** It starts with a mythological figure of Diana or Artemis, one of the many heroines in the show. What I do, generally, with these tapestries is a "brown reclamation." I embroider the figures and transform them into brown people. I adorn them and integrate materials like bindis, beads, saris, and other culturally specific materials. I claim that space in a way.

**JGC: *self-portrait* (2024) features a medal, long braids tied with ribbon, a grass skirt, and a woven background evoking tropical imagery. What are some of the symbolisms at play here?**

**SM:** I want to tell stories through materials. The grass is tropical. The braided saris symbolize many young South Asian women. My mom would braid my hair every day. Two figures with braids are hidden behind the grass, expressing a kind of duality. The medallion has a mythological element. In a way, the different parts become a whole, telling a story about the colonial past and also about where I live now in Los Angeles.

**JGC: *to love in silence* (2024) has special materials and meanings.**

**SM:** Yes, two of the most important materials in that work are two saris. First, a wedding sari that my mom's best friend had given her. It was very dear to her, but she was willing to share it with me. I wanted to use it in the work to honor her. Behind that, there is a sari that my husband's uncle gave me when I was getting married. It has a dual sense of something worn and something with possibilities. There's a whole section that's beaded, and I used decorative bindis as well.

**JGC: I'm fascinated by the titles and shapes of some of your more intimate pieces. What is the background behind a story yet untold?**

**SM:** The title suggests that all of us have unshared stories, especially women's stories. The head of a woman is sitting on a shelf. Ropes connect her to the tapestry, to her community, and to the past. The idea is that there's so much that has not been shared yet, and from that, we can, hopefully, learn something and share something.

**JGC: What are some of the highlights in "Bodies and Souls," your current exhibition at the Tampa Museum of Art?**

**SM:** There is one sizable new installation, three installations that have not been shown before, and a number of new and borrowed works. *to leave a trace* is brand, brand new. This work is suspended and two-sided. There's a long horizontal pole wrapped in braided gold twine, and there are fabricated sculpted mastheads of a goddess on each end. One is Devi, a Hindu goddess, and one is Diana. The pole pierces five tapestries made of saris and grass. Three are double-sided tapestries. Another new installation is an expanded version of *bodies and souls*. It's made of sari tops and shell work stitched together in a frame fabricated to be broken, so the sari tops spill onto the floor.

**JGC: What about your other solo show, "Myth from Matter," which opened in September at the National**



***Pappy's house*, 2024.**  
Vintage saris, fabric, and beaded trim, dimensions variable.

NICHOLAS LEA BRUNO







**Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA), in Washington, DC? And is there anything else you've been working on?**

**SM:** "myth from matter" is a survey of installations, sculptures, collages, and paintings, with some new works. My works are placed in conversation with historical objects and works that I've selected from the National Gallery of Art, NMWA, and various Smithsonian museums. For example, I've re-worked a tapestry copy of Fragonard's *Young Girl Reading*, and the actual Fragonard painting appears in the show.

I have also been making an installation for the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, Tennessee. *with abundance we meet* is a new *phala* installation, another kind of monument to women that consists of multiple fruit-like sculptures; *phala* means "fruit" in Hindi. These are also migrant bodies, filled with possibilities, and they seem to rise and fall, appear and disappear. They are made with everyday saris, not formal ones, so there is a sense of domestic labor.

**JGC: What are some of your other inspirations?**

**SM:** I have two sons and an amazing husband, Adam Graves, who is a philosophy professor, as well as a

filmmaker. We recently collaborated on a project that is mostly his—we created a film in India. It started its film festival run earlier this year.

**JGC: Any challenges or discriminations you've faced in the course of becoming who you are?**

**SM:** In the art world, women don't have the same opportunities; women of color and women over 40 and 50 don't have the same opportunities. There have been many moments of being ignored. The truth is, I feel lucky and grateful that I get to make work every day. This present moment is allowing for more voices to be heard, and I feel heard now. Making is most important to me. ■■■

*Suchitra Mattai's "Myth from Matter," at NMWA in Washington, DC, is on view through January 12, 2025. "Bodies and Souls," at the Tampa Museum of Art, continues through March 16, 2025. "she walked in reverse and found their songs" travels to the Seattle Art Museum in spring 2025. with abundance we meet, Mattai's new installation at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, opens November 15, 2024 and remains on view through May 2026.*

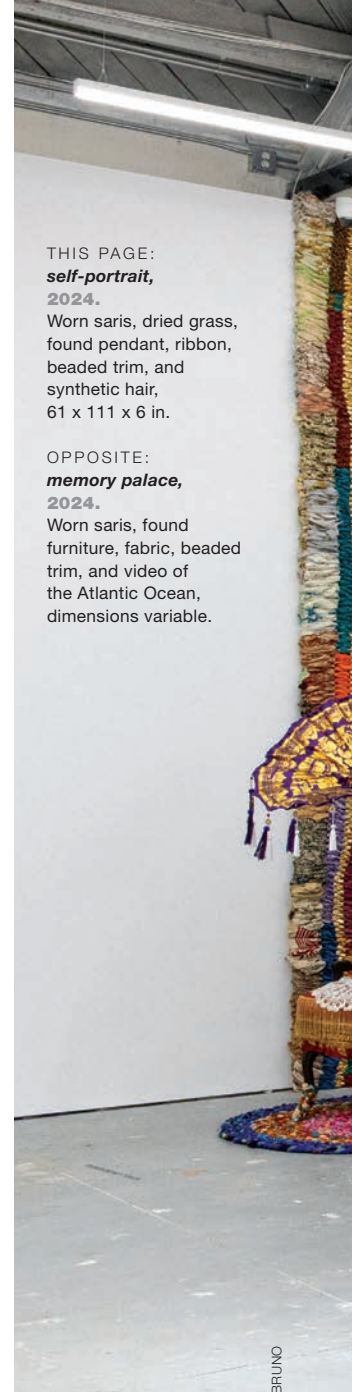


**THIS PAGE:  
self-portrait,  
2024.**

Worn saris, dried grass, found pendant, ribbon, beaded trim, and synthetic hair, 61 x 111 x 6 in.

**OPPOSITE:  
memory palace,  
2024.**

Worn saris, found furniture, fabric, beaded trim, and video of the Atlantic Ocean, dimensions variable.







“The saris came from my family and from all over India...I’m not attached to objects and the permanence of things. I use a lot of my family heirlooms in my work.”